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ABSTRACT

In searching for avenues to create a collaborative school environment in which autonomous teachers impact the outcomes of schooling and students become independent learners, there is increasing interest in "self-managing work groups." This paper presents findings of a study that examined the role of the principal in the development of self-managing work teams. First, the study selected four empowered middle schools with self-managing interdisciplinary teaching teams. Data were gathered through observation; interviews with the principal, team teachers, and counselors; and interviews with student-focus groups. Findings indicate that in working with self-managing teams, the principal facilitated reflection, team focus on goals, self-criticism, and self-reinforcement. (LMI)

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SCHOOL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-MANAGING TEAMS: LEADER BEHAVIOR IN DEVELOPING SELF-MANAGING WORK GROUPS IN SCHOOLS

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Running head: Self-managing teams

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Abstract

The reform literature has advocated the empowerment of school staff (Frymier, 1987; Lightfoot, 1985; Maeroff, 1988; Massachusetts Department of Education, 1988). The assumption in the literature is that a positive work environment, brought about by school participants who are able to initiate and carry out new ideas, results in enhanced learning opportunities for students. In particular Maeroff (1988) cites key empowerment components for teachers to be increased status, highly developed knowledge base, and autonomy in decision making. In searching for avenues for creating a collaborative school environment where teachers have the autonomy and competence to act to affect the outcomes of schooling and students become independent learners and problem-solvers, there is increasing interest in "self-managing work groups." It is possible for schools to function with groupings that function as self- managing work teams. This study identified empowered schools where participant groupings are functioning as self-managing work teams and studied the role of the principal in the growth and development of such groups.

SCHOOL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-MANAGING TEAMS: AN INVESTIGATION OF SELF MANAGING TEAMS AND LEADER BEHAVIOR IN DEVELOPING SELF-MANAGING WORK GROUPS IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

The reform literature has advocated the empowerment of school staff (Frymier, 1987; Lightfoot, 1985; Maeroff, 1988; Massachusetts Department of Education, 1988). The assumption in the literature is that a positive work environment, brought about by school participants who are able to initiate and carry out new ideas, results in enhanced learning opportunities for students. In particular Maeroff (1988) cites key empowerment components for teachers to be increased status, highly developed knowledge base, and autonomy in decision making.

For the purposes of this study, empowerment is defined as a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. Empowered individuals believe they have the skills and knowledge to act on a situation and improve it. Empowered schools are organizations that create opportunities for competence to be developed and displayed.

In searching for avenues for creating a collaborative school environment where teachers have the autonomy and competence to act to affect the outcomes of schooling and students become independent learners and problem-solvers, there is increasing interest in "self-managing work groups." Hackman (1986) characterized self-managing work groups as collections of people who take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their work, monitor their own performance, manage their own performance and seek

ways to improve it, seek needed resources from the organization, and take the initiative to help others improve (Hackman, 1986). Tom Peters (1987, p. 282) states, "...there is no limit to what the average person can accomplish if thoroughly involved...this can most effectively be tapped when people are gathered in human-scale groupings--that is, teams, or more precisely, self-managing teams."

It is possible for schools to function with groupings that function as self- managing work teams. In a recent study, interdisciplinary teaching teams in a newly-opened middle school in the midwest were well on their way to functioning as self-managing work teams (Kasten, Short, & Jarmin, 1988). Other configurations such as departmental teams in secondary schools, cross-grade level teaching teams in elementary schools, small school faculties, and certain highly functioning school-based committees could be examples of self-managing work groups. By definition, self-managing work groups function with empowered team members (Hackman, 1986). Therefore, the concept has merit for efforts in schools to empower all school participants.

Objectives of the Study

Objectives of this study were to identify empowered schools where participant groupings are functioning as self-managing teams or are well on the way to functioning at that level and to study the role of the principal in the growth and development of such groups. The primary research question guiding the study focused on identifying the attitudes, roles, and knowledge utilized by the principals

in each empowered school that facilitate self-managing work groups to

become self-evaluative, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcing?

Conceptual Framework

Frymier (1987, p. 9) states that "In any attempt to improve education, teachers are central." Rosenholtz (in press) suggests that "...the culture of a school changes significantly when experienced teachers stop functioning in isolation and start solving problems related to students' learning collectively." In any attempt to improve schools, attention must be given to roles in decision making and increased opportunities for meaningful, collective participation in the critical areas of activity in the organization which focus on organizational goals.

Empowerment

Rappaport and his colleagues have described empowerment as a construct that ties personal competencies and abilities to environments that provide opportunities for choice and autonomy in demonstrating those competencies (Zimmerman & Rappaport,1988). Although the construct can be applied to organizations, persons, and social policies, it appears to be a procedure whereby persons gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community (Katz, 1984; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Dunst (1991) has suggested that empowerment consists of two issues: (1) enabling experiences, provided within an organization that fosters autonomy, choice, control, and responsibility, which 2) allow the individual to display existing competencies as well as learn new competencies that support and strengthen functioning.

School restructuring has, as one of its components, the empowerment of teachers, administrators, and students (Murphy & Evertson, 1990; Short et al, 1991). In fact, the

restructuring paradigm of Murphy and Evertson includes empowerment as a integral part of reform. Lortie (1975) depicts teachers as working in isolation from other teachers. Little collegial contact is ever realized as teachers perform their craft in separate rooms. In addition to working in isolation, teachers are expected to complete reports and maintain orderly classrooms. These "around the clock" tasks tend to absorb available time for collegial interaction and contribute to the isolation of teachers.

Research by Gruber and Trickett (1987) conducted in an alternative school identified the importance of control over decision making in empowering participants in school organizations. Rinehart and Short (1991), in a study of empowerment of teacher leaders in the national program called Reading Recovery, found that teacher leaders saw opportunities for decision making, control over their daily schedule, high level of teaching competency, and opportunities for growth and development, as empowering aspects of their work. In addition, their work (Short & Rinehart, 1992) identified six empirically-derived dimensions of teacher empowerment: Involvement in decision making, teacher impact, teacher status, autonomy, opportunities for professional development, and teacher self-efficacy.

Self-Managing Teams

In recent years, the concept of self-managing work groups has been utilized in business and industry to further the cause of employee empowerment (Manz & Sims, 1987). In self-managing teams, employees take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their work, manage and monitor their own performance, seek needed resources, and take the initiative to help others improve (Hackman, 1986).

Hackman (1986) defined self-managing work groups by placing them on a continuum extending from management-led groups at one end to self-governing groups at another. Minimal criteria for self-managing groups were identified by Hackman and Oldham (1980):

(1) that the group be intact and identifiable--if sometimes small or temporary--social system, (2) that the group be charged with generating an identifiable product whose acceptability is potentially measurable, and (3) that the group have the authority to determine how members will go about working together to accomplish their task (p. 184).

While self-managing teams are generally portrayed as a way to increase worker autonomy and responsibility, organizational context is an important variable. Manz and Angle (1987) studied the introduction of self-managing work groups into an organization that had traditionally relied on individual self-management. In the context of an independent property and casualty insurance firm, self-managed work groups were found to threaten the personal control and autonomy of employees and to result in reduced services to customers. Self-managed work groups were introduced in this firm without worker participation or approval and were used as a means of increasing management control. Manz and Angle concluded that additional research is needed on the effects of introducing self-managing work groups in service occupations, particularly when employees have a history of individual autonomy.

Researchers have also been interested in the functions of leaders in organizations with self-managing teams. Most writers on the subject have concluded that leadership is at least as important in organizations with self-managing work groups as it is in

traditionally structured organizations (Cummings, 1978; Hackman, 1986; Lawler, 1986; Manz & Sims, 1987). Leadership is, however, different. Manz and Sims (1984) describe the leader in an organization with self-managing work groups as an "unleader," "one who leads others to lead themselves" (p. 411). Hackman (1986) noted that "leadership is both more important and a more demanding undertaking in self-managing units than in traditional organizations" (p. 119). Leaders must monitor the work of the groups by diagnosing and forecasting from available data and leaders must take action to create or maintain favorable conditions for the group. In Manz and Sims' study of a small parts manufacturing plant that operated with self-managing work groups, the most important leader behaviors were "encourage self-reinforcement" and "encourage self-observation/evaluation" (p. 124).

Organizations that utilize self-managing work groups operate with a bottom-up perspective and "the leader's job is to teach and encourage subordinates to lead themselves effectively" (Manz & Sims, 1987, p. 121). In the organization that Manz and Sims studied, top management called themselves "the support group." Skills that leaders working with self-managing groups must develop were listed by Cummings (1978), Hackman (1986), and Lawler (1986). While their particular lists differ, human relations skills are emphasized over technical skills, including the abilities to build trust, understand group dynamics, develop group members' capacities for autonomy, and empower others.

Middle School Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams

Kasten, Short, & Jarmin (1989) found that interdisciplinary teaching teams in a midwestern middle school exhibited characteristics of a self-managing work group: an

intact and discrete social system, responsibility for an identifiable part of the work, and authority to determine how members would work together to accomplish the task (see Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

Interdisciplinary teams are utilized in the middle grades in response to the unique needs of the early adolescent learner (Gatewood & Dilg, 1975; Merenbloom, 1986). Interdisciplinary teams involve a group of teachers who plan together and provide instruction to a particular group of students (Grooms, 1967). As an example, a team of four teachers representing mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts may plan together for the same cadre of students (George, 1973). They may meet one or more times a week to discuss strategies for addressing needs of certain students. They may also plan interdisciplinary teaching units to be taught cooperatively by the four teachers. The interdisciplinary team approach to planning curriculum allows for the integration of content areas and provides a means for teaching basic skills throughout all discipline areas (Merenbloom, 1986). The interdisciplinary team structure may facilitate the formation of collegial relationships to a greater extent than the traditional structure of the self- contained classroom (Alexander & George, 1981). Teachers on interdisciplinary teams generally have the discretion to select content, correlate units of instruction, and manage instruction to meet the needs of a particular group of students (Whitford & Kyle, 1984). This flexibility enhances the teachers' sense of control. In addition, interdisciplinary teams usually operate within a large block of instructional time (Merenbloom, 1986). Because each team is responsible for a particular group of students during this block of time, teachers may make decisions relative to the use of that time and

have the flexibility to determine both content and the organization of instruction. Teachers on interdisciplinary teams make decisions that greatly affect the nature of their work. These decisions can involve the scheduling of classes, integration of curriculum, grouping of students, and organization of instruction, all decisions not generally within the purview of the teacher (Alexander & George, 1981).

Teachers on teams have the power to make decisions about those things that directly affect the classroom and teaching. At the same time, it must be noted that work in teams cuts against many of the occupational norms of teaching, including norms of individuality, privacy, and isolation.

The investigation of the interdisciplinary teams as self-managing teams in middle school study (Kasten et al., 1988) suggests that the role of the principal must be further investigated in school settings where attempts at school empowerment, using the concept of self-managing work groups, is evident. Is it a unique role as suggested in the research literature on self-managing work groups in business and industry (Cummings, 1978; Lawler, 1086; Manz & Sims, 1987)? Is it a role that indeed empowers others in the organization? Does the principal role vary relative to the type of self-managing work group (cross-grade level teams vs. departmental teams in high schools, for example)? Is that role affected by school contextual variables (size, SES, teacher level of education and experience, for example).

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research methods (observations, interviews, document analysis) to answer the primary research question. The qualitative approach,

an interpretive, naturalistic model, analyzes phenomena based on assumptions which accommodate a small number of subjects. The conceptions, value orientations, and understandings of those being studied are discovered through personal observation and shared communication. Information is acquired from individuals at separate times to establish patterns of behavior, attitudes, and motivations. Qualitative inquiry operates in real situations and contexts, utilizing researcher-subject interaction to uncover information not otherwise accessible. This "intersubjectivity" is best achieved when the number of participants is small (Merriam, 1986). Researchers utilized several sources of data including historical and current documents, structured interviews, and field notes from observations.

Types of Data Collected at Each Site

The four sites for the study were selected based on researcher knowledge that forms of self-managing work groups currently exist in the schools in the form of interdisciplinary teaching teams. University professors, public school personnel from regional service units, and school administrators identified schools using interdisciplinary middle school teams. The researcher visited a sample of ten sites and selected four that approximated self-managing work groups based on (1) autonomous functioning and (2) self-direction exhibited by the teams within the school. The researcher spent two days in each of the four schools conducting observations and interviews in order to select the four schools for the study.

To collect the data required, it was necessary to observe self-managing team interactions. Observations were conducted over a six month period with three days per

month spent at each of the four sites. Observations of full school operations established the context in which the teams function. Observations of principal focused on those behaviors, actions, and roles that foster within the teams those attitudes and activities that establish the teams as autonomous and self-directing. Intensive interviews were conducted every other month at each site with the principal and teachers on teams. On three visits over the six months, focus group interviews were held with a sample of students from the teams. Two interviews were conducted with the counselors and other special teachers over the six months.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included the coding of role behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge of principals specifically in developing the self managing team obtained from field notes from observations, interview transcripts, and school documents such as principal memos, team documents, and other principal/team-related materials. Content analysis was used to organize responses to interview questions. Procedures followed those prescribed by Holsti (1968). Content analysis is a technique for objectively and systematically identifying those characteristics of messages which bear relevance to some theoretical construct. This technique analyzes communication content by consistently applying selected criteria to verbal messages and categorizing responses according to those criteria.

The process used for theory building is known as analytic deduction, in which data are collected and categorized through two interconnected processes--enumerative deduction and eliminative deduction (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The former process

collects and records data by number and type of response. The latter probes for alternative or rival explanations which might affect the emerging construct. This second process eliminates the threat of an analysis in which only information supporting the researcher's original notions is examined (Holsti, 1968; Merriam, 1986). The two processes systematically elicit both similar and dissimilar patterns which point out relationships and help specify appropriate organization of variables.

After preliminary coding and display, all data were reviewed for parallel and dissenting responses and for pattern recognition. Frequently occurring variables and those variables which showed interactions were identified. Variables were assembled in clusters which illuminated patterns of response. Observational data were coded and analyzed for trends, themes, categories and relationships relative to the research questions. To triangulate the data collection, document analysis, observations, and structured interviews were used. Documents reviewed were principal communiques, materials sent home to parents, newspaper articles, minutes of any team meetings, communique among faculty both within and among teams, school goal- statements, any additional material related to self-managing teams and the principal. These multiple sources of information; observation; document analysis, and intensive interviews; were used because "no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective ..." on a program (Patton, 1990, p. 157). By using these combination of sources, the various data facilitated validation and cross-checking of the findings. To provide additional triangulation, multiple researchers collected and crossed checked the emerging themes from the data during data reduction.

Participant Schools

All of the schools in the study are located in the eastern and central part of a middle Atlantic state. The schools are from four districts, two suburban and two urban. All schools are organized on the traditional middle school model with interdisciplinary teaching teams. Most have been functioning well as innovative middle schools for some time. The principals in each site have been in their positions for 8 to 10 years.

School A is located in a suburban area with 650 students in grades 6 and 7. The female principal has been providing leadership in the school for 7 years. Teachers indicate that they need to make some improvements in their approach to interdisciplinary teaching. Each team holds formal meetings together two times per week, one meeting to set the agenda for the other meeting. The second meeting is used to discuss specific students who may need additional attention or help. Specialists often are brought in to provide additional insight and expertise. Special teachers such as foreign language, art, and vocational education are not members of the teams. Teachers on each team have a common office space which includes a phone, large desks for each teacher on the team, and conference tables and computers. All teachers in the school are connected to Internet.

School B is located in an urban setting. Approximate 900 students populate grades 7 - 9 in this popular middle school. The school is characterized as being very innovative with exciting projects and activities motivating the students. Units are taught around broad themes for the entire grade level. In other words, "Hawaii" may be the 6th grade theme for eight weeks with each team using "Hawaii" to teach the core areas.

School C can be found in a largely suburban area and enjoys a student population of 850 in grades 6 - 8. The busy faculty spend a great deal of time trying new ideas within the teams. Teachers have access to all equipment and materials in the school. The principal has developed some innovative ways to give release time to special teachers who have become members of a interdisciplinary team. There are no bells in this school to indicate the movement of students. The students move from station to station with ease and little noise. The principal holds regular "conversations" with the teams to find ways to assist their efforts.

School D is found in an urban setting with approximately 950 students in grades 6 - 8. Grades 6 and 7 enjoy an interdisciplinary teaching approach while grade 8 is organized within the teams in the more traditional subjects with little interdisciplinary work.

Findings and Conclusions

Principals in each of the four schools were energetic, enthusiastic about the middle school concept, expressed delight in working with students and great confidence in the teachers in their respective schools. One principal said, "They can make better decisions than I can on things that affect learning. Principals were very knowledgeable about what was happening in the various teams both in terms of what was being taught as well as ongoing issues that the teams were dealing with at various times. One team interviewed said, "He is a conversation person, always talking with us as a colleague-as if he is keenly interested in what we are doing". Another teacher from a seventh grade team felt that the principal "...facilities our problem solving. When we get stuck or complacent, she

always asks us questions that make us rethink." One principal attending many of the team meetings at various times but said very little. However, the teachers seemed to believe that his presence "...indicated interest and commitment to our work, not surveillance."

Central Themes

Themes have evolved that provide insight regarding the role of the principal in facilitating self-managing teams in the four middle schools in the study.

Facilitates Reflection

A key behavior of the principals in each of the four schools was helping the teams to engage in reflection. It was as if the team learned a process for thinking about events, the ramifications of action taken, and the implications for change. One principal said when talking with a member of a team, "When that happened yesterday, when did the light bulb go off for the members? What principle do you think the team used in making that decision?" Examples of this reflective behavior by principals included refusal to solve the problem experienced by a team but encouraging the team to experiment with alternative solutions with the principal providing any support needed. In one case, a team was experiencing conflict in work style. Instead of reassigning members or instigating a tight supervision of the team, the principal offered several resources, including a psychologist trained in team effectiveness, but let the team decide what resources were needed and how to solve the dilemma.

Facilitates the Focusing of the Team on Goals

The interdisciplinary teams that enjoyed the most success in becoming self-

managing appeared to also be the teams most able to establish clear goals and an understanding of what they were about and how to move forward. The concept of the "unleader" (Manz & Sims, 1987) was the most apparent among the three principals where teams operated the most self-managed. These principals refused to impose ideas on the teams but used "conversations" as a means for encouraging team goal-setting. One principal kept the teams focused on kids by attending some of the team meetings and, in a very unintrusive manner, would occasionally say, "How is Johnny doing?" That one statement would cause the team to talk about "Johnny". In interviewing the principal, he stated, "I do that with certain children that I believe are falling through the cracks. I see them on the basketball court at lunch, before school, and in other settings that teachers might miss. I have a big picture of the student that may be helpful to the teaching team. By asking about Johnny in a curious but non-threatening way, I help the team focus on a specific child."

Facilitates the Self-Criticism of the Team

The principals encouraged the team members to be critical of their performance especially if progress (with students and with teams) was not up to par. Principals appeared to do this best by modeling self-criticism. One principal would often describe something that she had tried to accomplish, in front of the teams, and then critique her success. This was done in a positive light, always in a supportive environment. These schools modeled risk-taking environments. One teacher said, "I know I can try any new idea here and expect a supportive and helpful critique if something does not go well. I won't get in trouble, instead I have help." In another school, a teacher characterized the

role of the principal as "...clearly facilitating our own efforts to be superior teachers by asking us to consider how something could be done differently." She went on to say that the principal's questions were not seen as criticism but as an intense interest on new ideas.

Facilitates Team Self-Reinforcement

An very present activity of the four principals was to help the teams acknowledge their own successes rather than wait for someone else to provide reinforcement and praise. One principal regularly held "bragging sessions" to the kind of "celebrating that we do not do in schools." Another principal frequently asked teachers, "Are you pleased with what happened? How did the team itself celebrate this achievement?" Teams in these schools were looking within the teams for a sense of accomplishment and, in two of the schools, had begun to develop rituals for acknowledging and celebrating the attainment of certain team goals. All principals in the study engaged in status-building strategies for the teams. For example, principals alerted professional organizations and other groups about the expertise among the team members and encouraged them to invite the teachers in their schools to participate in regional and national conferences. In essence, they nominated their teachers for opportunities to perform as professionals in the public forum. In one school, when a team expressed interest in a new ideas or technique, she would send a representative of the team to visit the site where the idea was in practice so the teacher could return and try the new ideas in the team.

These four themes dominated the roles and behaviors assumed by the principals in these schools. The roles that facilitated the effective development of the self-managing

teaching teams centered around helping teams reflect, therefore, becoming better problem solvers and building expertise (Short & Rinehart, 1993). These principals also engaged in behaviors that fostered self-critique among team members. This attribute of teams is essential for self-management. Principals modeled through the critique of their own actions and decisions with interacting with the teams.

A pervasive behavior of these principals was the facilitation of team goal setting. By using informal "conversation" and constant interaction with the teams, these principals communicated the key expectations for team focus on kids and learning. Most asked teams to talk about where they were and where they wanted to go throughout the year. Observations of team interaction indicated that the teams used terms like "our goal...benchmarks...short-term planning...total quality...", indicating a knowledge base around planning and goal setting.

Principals in these schools worked hard to help teams learn to gain reinforcement from within the team itself. In one of the schools, teams had begun to experiment with alternative assessment with students without any prodding by the principal or district office. When the teachers wanted to videotape students to indicate student responsibility in group work to go into student portfolios, the principal quietly bought the video equipment and made it available to all the teams. He never indicated that a team must use it. In an interview, the principal stated, "I am listening when they do not think that I am. I heard them talk about videotaping so I made sure the resources were available for them. I figured that if getting the equipment was a barrier, then trying innovative ideas would become punishing and frustrating to them. This way, successfully implementing an innovation would be very reinforcing and encourage trying new ideas.

The behavioral themes gleaned from the principals in the schools in this study should be informative to those interested in understanding the kind of leadership that fosters self-managing teams. Further study of principal facilitative behaviors that encoura ge self-managing work groups to become self-evaluative, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcing would greatly assist reform efforts to create schools where participants feel greatly empowered.

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